

Activate

Faith in Motion

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In our study of Romans, we've considered the vast and glorious implications of the gospel. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we can be right with God, not because of who we are or what we've done, but by faith. In Christ, we have been set free from sin and death, have received the Spirit, and have been adopted into God's family. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are no longer under the reign of sin, but the reign of God's grace.

If all this is ours in Christ, what does that mean for how we live?

In Romans 12–16, Paul is going to get very practical. He insists that all believers live and behave according to the mercy God has given them through Christ. He wants followers of Christ to view themselves as family, no matter how ethnicity, experience, culture, or social status threaten to divide. In this final section of his letter to the Romans, Paul instructs churches in how to find unity in their diversity, with each member contributing to the good of the whole. And when we struggle to find that unity in the midst of conflict, Paul helps us find the way forward.

Because he is writing to a tiny minority of Jesus-followers in the capital city of the empire, we're going to get some guidance on how to relate to those in power. We're also going to get a glimpse into Paul's aspirations for the spread of the gospel as he and invites the Roman believers, and by extension you and I, to share in that mission.

As Paul sketches for us the qualities and character that he desires for the house churches in Rome, and all those who come after, we're going to see a familiar figure come into focus—Jesus. It is Jesus who we want to think like, act like, and love like. As we think about what it means to live out our faith in our 21st century world, it's more and more like Jesus that we want to become.

Activate | Week 1

Romans 12:1–8

Each one of us must make our own individual commitment to Jesus. We can't inherit our parent's faith or absorb it from our community. Our relationship with the Father is personal and unique. Yet we are not an only child.

We are part of the worldwide family of God with brothers and sisters from every corner of the globe. We are also part of a local family with siblings drawn from our community. We are connected and interdependent on each other. In the same way that a hand or an eye would be without purpose unless it is attached to a body, we need to be deeply joined to the body of Christ.

In our passage this week, Paul is urging the house churches in Rome to commit themselves to God and each other.

Day 1

Our passage this week starts with a resounding “therefore” followed by an urgent plea from the apostle Paul. Recall that in chapters 9–11 Paul shared his heartbreak over the Jewish rejection of the Messiah while also explaining the astounding plan of God to create a people for himself drawn from both Jews and Gentiles. He ended chapter praising God for his glorious wisdom and knowledge.

Now he turns his attention once more to the squabbling churches in Rome and challenges them to live out their faith.

Read the Word

Romans 12:1–8 (NIV)

***12** Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment,

in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

- So, what is the “therefore” there for? Why do you think Paul starts with that transition word?
- Why do you think Paul uses a body as a metaphor in the second half of the passage? Why is it useful for describing the relationship Christians should have with each other?

Reflect

The Christian church should be one of the most awe-inspiring organizations on earth. People from every background and walk of life coming together in love and unity to worship God and serve others. People empowered by the Holy Spirit to give supernatural wisdom, compassion, and help to the watching world. People should be wowed by the church. If they're not, why aren't they?

It takes every one of us doing what Paul describes in Romans 12:1–8 before we can be the body that Jesus desires us to be. Are you up for it? This week, will you seriously think and pray about how you can offer yourself to God and to others? Then will you commit to act according to what the Spirit shows you? Imagine what Christ Fellowship could become if every one of us said yes!

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I am in awe of your mercy! I want to respond as Paul describes here, by offering myself as a living sacrifice to do your will. Help me see the gifts that you have given me so that I can join with my brothers and sisters in Christ to live out your will in the world.

Day 2

I was a very well-dressed little girl because my grandmother loved to sew. Sometimes she would let me look through all the dress patterns she had folded neatly and stored inside envelopes. Inside each envelope were thin and crinkly pieces of printed paper cut into shapes to be used as a pattern to cut and stitch together the fabric to make the dress. All the lines and

shapes looked rather confusing to me, but an experienced seamstress like my grandmother could envision the finished dress from a stack of thin paper shapes.

Just like my grandmother's sewing patterns, there are patterns all around us. Forms and shapes and designs that we can mold ourselves into. These patterns are not so different than the ones available to the Roman Christians.

Roman society was highly stratified, and the pursuit of status was central to the life of many males. Called the "*corsus honorum*," or course of honor, the journey to status was open to those of noble birth and wealth, those successful in military battle, or those gifted in public rhetoric and famed in virtue.

In our culture, status still comes from family connections, wealth and possessions. We highly value physical beauty, athletic ability, and fame. The patterns of this world show up on magazine covers, movie screens, and increasingly, YouTube channels and Instagram accounts.

As you read the passage for today, think about how Paul's advice to the Christians in Rome can help us choose the right pattern today.

Read the Word

Romans 12:1–2

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Reflect on the Word

Most scholars see a natural division in the book of Romans beginning with chapter 12 verse 1. Paul begins this section by once again addressing the letter's recipients as "brothers and sisters" and then reminds them of how they should present themselves to God because of his great mercy, a prominent theme in Romans 9–11.

The term Paul uses here to describe the believer's posture toward God is "living sacrifice." Both Jews and Gentiles would have been familiar with the practice of offering an appropriate sacrifice to a deity, but here Paul is asking for an offering that is all encompassing — one's own body. God expects that all of the believer will be dedicated to him.

How might the Roman Christians have received this instruction? Imagine the gathered assembly of Roman Christians: men and women, Jew and Gentile, master and slave, educated

and not. Some would be of high status, but most would not be. Paul's call to be living sacrifices has implications for everyone present. Everyone is called to dedicate his or her own life.

Yet this sacrifice is also a unified act performed collectively: "It is an act in which all types of people in the house church can take part because the sacrifice is not of the body of an ox, affordable only by the wealthy, but of their own bodies... they might own no goods at all, but they could still take some actions."¹

Every person who is consecrated to God must be conformed to his will and not to the pattern of the world around them. Paul tells them to be transformed by "the renewing of your mind." They must learn to think, feel, and reason in light of God's realities — in light of everything Paul has described in Romans 1–11. In two short verses Paul has insisted that both thoughts and actions must be different for those in the family of God.

The transformation must be a complete re-shaping of both the individual and the community to the image of Christ and it will affect the way believers relate to one another and those outside the family. Individually it means that though the pressure to be molded by the culture will be intense, it has to be constantly resisted in the Spirit. As the body of Christ, it means that the church will also have to resist being formed to any cultural standards that exist outside the will of God. So collectively, the struggle will be constant as well. Each generation of Christians will have to resist the pull of its "world," submit to the Spirit, and apply the wisdom of the Scriptures in an ever-evolving context.

But it starts with a willingness to live as an embodied sacrifice, because in view of God's mercy shown so clearly to us in Christ and by the Spirit, how could we live otherwise?

- What patterns of this world do you feel pressured to conform to?
- Where do you see the church having to resist the patterns of this world?
- Thinking about your everyday life, how can you live as an embodied sacrifice to God? What might that mean day to day?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Spirit, renew my mind. I want to be conformed to the pattern of Jesus, not of this world. Teach me what it means to live as an embodied sacrifice devoted to worshipping you with my whole life.

Day 3

¹ Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 100.

Out there on the internet, there are scores of personality assessments, aptitude tests, and ways to evaluate yourself by almost any measure. But how do we evaluate ourselves as we consider our place in the body of Christ? What should our mindset be?

Our passage today speaks to this issue.

Read the Word

Romans 12:3–5

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

- How should we think of ourselves?
- Who does each member belong to?

Reflect

Paul moves from talking about living and embodied sacrifice to discussing the body of Christ – an image that signifies unity in diversity. Recall that back in Romans 5 Paul insists that we were no longer slaves to sin and death, but under the reign of grace. In Romans 8:5, Paul talks about two different mindsets, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” The mindset of a “transformed mind” means that our desires will be in line with what the Spirit desires. His will is that we respond to God’s grace by unifying as the body of Christ.

For us today, as well as those entrenched in Roman culture, the quest for status was a major temptation. The quest for personal gratification and status have no place in the life of the body. We are to use “sober judgment” in evaluating ourselves and use our gifts for the good of others. We aren’t conceited or puffed up, but neither are we self-deprecating or self-denigrating. We are honest about who we are and where we are in our journey with God. After all, we are relying completely on God’s grace.

The image of a body with many parts that Paul uses here and in 1 Corinthians 12 is a powerful one. It speaks to the diversity of gifts that God gives us, yet reminds us that they are given for a unifying purpose. It demonstrates how valuable each of us is while insisting that we need one another. It’s a wonderful illustration that individualistic cultures like ours can struggle to fully grasp.

Can we get really real for a moment? Too many of us approach church membership with the same mindset that we would a gym membership. We're looking for the nicest amenities, the best instructors, the most encouraging staff, and a club that is worthy of our financial investment. We're willing to put in the work while we're there, but our goal is solely to improve our own health and fitness. We're not overly concerned about the guy on the treadmill next to us. And if the quality "slips" a little, or we disagree with the trainer's advice, or find that the instructors are too challenging (or not challenging enough), or if the club isn't attracting the right kind of people (however we define that), we'll just move on.

While that's a reasonable mind-set when it comes to a gym, it's not when it comes to a church. Why? Because the church isn't a business with clientele, it's a body that needs every member to use their gifts for the good of the other members and the community in which it lives.

Part of having the "transformed mind" that Paul talks about is fighting against the pattern of this world that tells us that we can have everything just the way we like it. From our playlists to our meals to our vacation packages, we can customize and individualize so much in our lives to conform to our personality and temperament.

That's not the mindset the Spirit calls us to when it comes to our relationships within the family of God. He wants to transform us so that we think of our uniqueness as something we contribute to the good of Christ's body. Like Jesus himself, Paul calls us to be God and other-centered, and not just centered on ourselves.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, help me see the body of Christ from your perspective. Help me evaluate myself with sober judgment. Help me fight against the patterns of this world that invite me to think only of myself. I want to have a transformed mind. I want to contribute to the body of Christ according to your will.

Day 4

I don't know about you, but there are times I don't feel very gifted or useful. I can fall into the trap of comparing myself to other people, or wishing I was better, or trying to meet some impossible standard I've conjured up in my mind, or of feeling disqualified by some mistake I made. At those times, I can almost hear the Enemy taunting me, "Who do you think you are? You're no good to anybody."

That is of course, a lie. What's more, it doesn't matter who I think I am. It is not in my own natural strength or ability that I'm trying to do good for God or for others. All of our gifts come from the Spirit. He is able to do a whole lot with someone who is simply open to being used!

Read the Word

Romans 12:6–8

⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Reflect

The gifts are what happens when the Spirit of God takes the living sacrifice offered by a believer and uses it for the good of the body of Christ.² In the Greek, there is a word play in verse six, “Believers possess different *charismata* (“gifts”); but each one is the product of God’s *charis* (“grace”).³ It’s important for us to remember that the gifts Paul lists are just that, they are given to us by the Spirit to build up the body of Christ. They aren’t conjured up in our own strength or for our own purposes.

Paul lists different gifts of the Spirit in three of his letters: here in Romans, in 1 Corinthians, and in Ephesians. None of the lists are identical and only prophecy and teaching appear on all three.

First on Paul’s Romans list is prophecy, which is when “Prophets speak revelations from God to the people of God ‘according to the rule of faith’”⁴ meaning that their prophecies must be in accordance with Christian teaching. Prophecy need not regard future events can be any Spirit-prompted message to be delivered to the people of God. Those serving are available to be used, those teaching “mentor believers into wisdom and maturity” and those encouraging “inspire others to courage, to self-sacrifice, to love, to holiness and to obedience.”⁵

Paul adds giving, which is to share one’s resources with the body, leading which requires being out in front and garnering enough trust that others follow, and mercy which is to be given “cheerfully.”

This list is not exhaustive, and Paul likely has specific reasons for mentioning the gifts he does, even if we can’t be sure of them. Nevertheless, “Paul is then not just listing gifts; he is

² McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*, unpublished manuscript, 2018.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 764.

⁴ McKnight.

⁵ McKnight.

exhorting each member of the community to use his or her own gift diligently and faithfully to strengthen the body's unity and help it to flourish."⁶

Even though he mentions several gifts by name, Paul is leaving room for the Spirit to empower people to meet the specific needs of the body at a given place and time. "Whatever the Spirit prompts you to do for the good of others is a spiritual gift."⁷ While God has created us uniquely with certain talents and abilities and it's good to prayerfully seek God's guidance as to how he might consistently use you in the body, we can get analysis-paralysis when it comes to gifting. Notice that Paul has stated things very simply and directly. If you have a gift, then use it, because you're what the body needs. So, if you're not sure if you're an ear or a big toe, show up and serve and see what happens!

The Spirit will do incredible things to those who are willing. I've seen an usually quiet and shy person boldly proclaim the gospel to a crowd. I've seen people who "aren't good with children" bless the socks off some preschoolers. Living sacrifices with transformed minds who are waiting to be used will be. The body needs you! How will you do your part?

- How is the Spirit using you to bless the body of Christ? How has he gifted you?
- Are you regularly serving in some capacity in your local church? If not, why not?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you for using me in the body! I am grateful that I get to be used by you. I want to yield to your Spirit and be ready for your service. Guide me and empower me as you will.

Day 5

Happy Friday! How has the Spirit been at work in your life this week? How has God revealed himself through his Word? How are you learning to be more like Jesus? Take some time today to reflect one more time on Romans 12:1–8 and devote yourself to prayer.

Reflect on what you've learned

What are your biggest takeaways from this week's passage? How is the Spirit communicating with you through it?

⁶ Moo, 765.

⁷ McKnight.

As we move through Romans 12–16, we will talk a lot about how we can think and act more like Jesus. A word for this is “Christoformity,” being conformed to the image of Christ. What do you learn about being Christlike from this passage?

Make Connections

The connection we have with other believers is unique and powerful. The Spirit of God lives in every Christian giving us a bond that will last into eternity. As Christians, our identity is fundamentally rooted in Christ, therefore our kinship with fellow believers is also deeply rooted. We are family in the best sense of the word.

In Christ, we have spiritual brothers and sisters. Each of us is a former sinner who has experienced the life-changing grace of God and has been adopted into his family. We share with our spiritual siblings the desire to love, honor and worship God. We also share a mission to impact others with the love of Christ. Although we love and care for all people, it’s with fellow Christians that we have a special bond.

Churches aren’t perfect because people aren’t. But as we think of ourselves as living sacrifices, allow the Spirit to guide us, empower us, and use the gifts he gives us, we are imitating Christ. And when Christ is at the center of a faith community, it will take on his personality.

Pray

What is the Spirit leading you to pray today? As you looked back through Romans 12:1–8, what need or lack did you sense in your own soul? Pray that the Spirit will fill it. Pray that he will transform you as you seek to be conformed to Christ and not the pattern of this world.

Pray about your place in the church. Maybe you’ve had some bad experiences as you’ve tried to fit in or use your spiritual gift. Pray through any old hurts. Or maybe you’ve always been a Sunday-only Christian and you’ve never really plugged into your church. Pray through that as well. Or maybe you’re serving now, but are trying to do it without seeking the Spirit’s gifting. Ask him to fill and empower you.

There are so many ways our experiences in the body can be challenging and the Father knows this! It requires a supernatural level of love, humility, endurance, compassion, and grace to find unity in the body. Take some time to pray for your church!

What’s Your Next Step?

Based on your prayer time, there are many next steps that you might need to take.

Maybe you need to ask or offer forgiveness, seek out a new way to serve, or you may simply need to get more involved in your local church. Our website, CFHome.org has information on groups and ways to serve at Christ Fellowship. Maybe your next step is to start there.

Think through a concrete next step that you'll take this week.